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ABSTRACT

Newly appointed principals are usually confronted with the complexity of their new role, which some researchers believe is complicated by the recognition of their role distance from teachers. This paper examines the nature of the passage from the teacher role to the principal role. It pursues Marshall's (1991) micropolitical hypothesis, which explains principals' denial of the chasm existing between themselves and teachers as the presentation of politically correct rhetoric. Interviews were conducted with two new secondary principals in a school district that served the fringe of a large urban area. The female and male principals headed a large and a smaller school, respectively. Unlike the principal's in Marshall's study, the two principals both described conflict in the individual perceptions of their role and school culture. Both described their sense of isolation, compounded by teachers who believed that the principals were extensions of the central office and central office administrators who treated them as integral members of their schools. When faced with the dilemma of serving the school or the system, both principals developed ties with other principals who shared a similar status passage and experiences. Examining the separation between administrators and staff through an analysis of cultural connections between administrators provides support for Marshall's micropolitical hypothesis. (LMI)

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New Principals' Experiences with Leadership: Crossing the cultural boundary

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People inside and outside of school settings have pre-conceived ideas about the principal's role, ideas which are based on their previous experience with individuals in that role and on community and societal expectations and assumptions. Unfortunately, unless they are principals themselves, individuals have limited means to test their understanding of principals' work. Even candidates for the principalship who "know" the role through administrative training programmes do not "know" administration in practice or the increasing complexity of the role created by the meshing of variables in unexpected ways (Cuban, 1994).

Newly appointed principals face a difficult dilemma: while learning to be principals and to cope with the complexity of their new role, they often must do so without the luxury of time to reflect on what they are learning (e.g., Roberts, 1992b). During entry, then, they face the task of confirming or rejecting their pre-conceptions of administration at the same time as they are adjusting to new sets of responsibilities and expectations. Further, new principals must unravel the complexities and implications of the culture of their new schools (Schein, 1985: p. 299) and make decisions based on that understanding. To be judged effective by teachers and other stakeholders, these decisions must be acceptable, or at least understandable within the context of their organization (Blau, 1964: p. 201-202).

Often in the course of learning about the principalship, new administrators begin to perceive the development of a difference and distance, or separateness between themselves and their staffs. The source of this perception may be the nature of the role and the demands placed on it by teachers. As Ball (1987) puts it,

> Like prime ministers, heads [principals] are people that their subordinates love to hate. The demands addressed to the head defy satisfaction because they frequently contain contradictory expectations (p. 157).

While we may intellectually acknowledge the existence of a distance and difference between administrators and teachers, Marshall (1991) suggests that the "chasm" separating the two may not be as deep or as wide as people believe it to be. In her study of individuals newly appointed to various administrative positions and of their agreement with teachers about schools, she found little to suggest that conflict exists between these two professional cultural groups. She suggests

three possible explanations for her findings. One she calls the "New Era" hypothesis which states that principals have actually changed and are closer to teachers in their conception of schools. The second she terms the "Micropolitical" hypothesis which states principals may have dissembled or deconstructed their responses to mask their true sentiments and to present politically correct rhetoric. In the third or methodological hypothesis, she provides possible reasons for not finding the expected conflicts, including wrong research assumptions, participants too new to their positions, the use of potentially biased interviewers and instruments, and the suppression of conflict and self-deception by participants.

This paper pursues Marshall's conception of a "chasm" separating administrators and teachers. The main differences between this study and hers are: only beginning principals were involved; the interviewer had no connections to the school district; and unlike Marshall's participants, the beginning principals here were very clear about the internal and external conflicts they experienced during their entry into the profession. For this paper, then, the questions to be examined are: What is the nature of an individual's passage from the role of teacher to the role of principal? Is there a separation between principals and teachers? If there is a separation, then what is the nature of that separation?

While this paper is based on interview data, the following discussion incorporates this data into an exploration of the literature. Further, "role distance" is used interchangeably with "role separation" to denote difference between the teacher's and the principal's role.

The Study

This is part of a larger study focusing on succession. The data used here were collected through semi-structured interviews with two new secondary school principals, Beth and Jim. Both of their schools were in the same school district serving the fringes of a large urban area. While Beth's school was quite large (1650 students) and had a particular programmatic focus, Jim's was small for the area (650 students) and had no programmatic focus. To maintain a sense of expectation among its administrators and to provide a pool of versatile administrators, the school board had a policy of regularly rotating its principals at intervals of approximately five years.

Each interview lasted from one and half hours to two hours and excerpts from the interviews were transcribed from the tape recordings. The data were analyzed to isolate descriptions of practices used during the process of entry and to determine what principals understood about the changes they experienced during this process. Wherever possible, reflections about practices were noted.

Role Distance and Status Passage: The New Principal's Perspective

For her study, Marshall (1991) assumed that role separation exists between teachers and principals. In most other organizations, the distance between managers and workers is taken for granted and is believed to be caused, at least in part, by the uncertainty inherent in the managerial function (Kanter, 1977). In these organizations, the administrative structure appears to be quite stable, but new officeholders soon discover this is a facade. Almost as part of the price of entry, these new administrators continue to perpetuate the myth of stability by helping to restrict access to information about the managerial role in order to maintain the appearance of being "predictable and routine" (Kanter, 1977: p. 48). To limit the effects of uncertainty, any aggression role takers may feel as a result of their frustration with the organization is often turned outwards against their subordinates (Hirschorn, 1987: p.55). Only through the "social similarity" of administrators' experience (Kanter, 1977: p. 48) is discussion of difficulties permitted between managers but not between managers and people outside the role. Unfortunately, this action only isolates them further from those under their administration, adds to the role distance between managers and their employees (Goffman, 1961: p. 115) and limits severely any possibility for a comprehensive understanding of the managerial role by aspirants. This is no less true of new principals who at first may not believe in the existence of a distance between themselves and teachers, and who may have difficulty later probing the extent of that distance (e.g., Parkay, 1992 versus Hall, 1992).

Initially for new principals as with administrators in other contexts, their appointment usually creates a sense of excitement and of opening opportunities (Sarason, 1972). The prospect of effecting school-wide changes and of influencing the system as a whole looms large in their imaginations. Once in office, however, perspectives change and a reality different from initial

perceptions intrudes, a reality which forces acknowledgement of the organizational limitations placed on them (e.g., Hill, 1992; Roberts, 1992a).

On further investigation, these new principals often describe their promotion not only in terms of a status passage (Glaser and Strauss, 1971), but also in terms reminiscent of entry into another culture entirely. Once familiar patterns of behaviour are no longer as familiar or as understandable from the perspective of their new role. Assumptions they made about the principalship while still teachers are called into question by exposure to new norms of behaviour and to new values and assumptions placed on them by their supervisors and by teachers. To succeed, however, incumbents must not only make the "right" decision for their new cultural contexts, but also **appear** to have made the "right" decision in order to create and to reinforce credibility in their leadership (Evetts, 1994).

To illustrate, Beth, the principal of the larger of the two schools, gathered information on entry, and on discovering that nearly all teachers complained regularly about one particular issue, she instituted a solution to the problem based on her understanding of this issue. She assumed that everyone agreed about the solution and that teachers would be pleased that she had dealt with the problem. She was very much taken aback, however, when she met with strong staff resistance and quite vocal criticism of her actions. While she had followed administrative procedures correctly, "the Old Guard went rangy" because she had not followed cultural procedures for such decisions, procedures about which she was unaware. To restore some semblance of trust in her administration, Beth had to rescind her decision; she had to conduct a workshop on the issue for the 105 teachers on staff; and she had to re-institute the decision once agreement had been reached by the staff that her solution was acceptable. While Beth assumed that she had had license to make changes in her new school, she had not understood the norms of behaviour for administrators established by teachers through tradition, norms which were in conflict with her assumptions.

Once new principals like Beth begin to understand the implications of their appointment, the distance between their old role as teacher and new role as administrator becomes translated by them as a status passage. However, the distance travelled may cause changes in outlook and behaviour which may not be understood by those who have not experienced it, including

teachers, friends or even the new principals, themselves. Beth, for example, had been involved earlier in her career as a consultant to principals who had difficult entries, and was very aware of the problems associated with succession. Yet she said, "You think with all this background, that I wouldn't have made any mistakes. I did. I made some mistakes."

Of particular difficulty for some new principals is the change in the nature of the relationship they have with former colleagues. Jim, the principal of the smaller of the two schools, described the succession of an acquaintance.

> I also saw from him that he was someone returning to the school where he had been a teacher. And I also saw for him the loneliness of office, the fact you couldn't be one of the boys the way it was expected that he could be. He was welcomed back by his "cronies" thinking "Terrific!" and he wasn't what had left the school. He had changed and I think they hadn't. And they were a little bit rough on him because he wasn't the person he had been when he left.

New principals often experience a feeling of isolation when teachers who were once friends and colleagues become subordinates who seek advice and guidance. Jim experienced this isolation and was uncomfortable with the distance placed between himself and teachers by the staff looking to him for expertise. He voiced his uneasiness with this aspect of his new role.

> The number of people who look to me for answers still overwhelms me and surprises me and disappoints me sometimes. The answer is available in a myriad of other sources.

Whether they wish to acknowledge the fact or not, principals begin to realize the distance they have travelled, the status they have been given, and the separation which now exists between their present and their former roles.

Role Distance and Status Passage: Teachers' Influence

While principals are making the passage between the classroom and the office, teachers add to the distance of that passage by restricting the flow and the type of information available to the new principal. In some cases, especially in schools which have experience with principal turnover, teachers often limit the potential disruption of a succession event by taking a "wait-and-

see" attitude before endorsing the new administrator (Macmillan, 1992). Although acknowledging that an individual "has a right to some learner's license and a limit to formality of obligation (Goffman, 1961: p. 140)," staff often test a new principal by trying to determine how the individual uses information. In these instances, staff may purposely withhold or downplay the importance of crucial bits of information required to make the "right" decision for that cultural context. Once judged to have passed the "test", the new administrator will likely experience an ease of entry into the culture of the school and acceptance by the staff. If the individual fails, however, access to information will be restricted and the principal will be denied an understanding of the culture needed to legitimate his or her administration.

During Beth's succession, this issue became a factor in her attempts to develop credibility in her administration. On arrival, her "aim was to learn as much about the school norms, concerns and climate as I possibly could and get as wide a range of input as I possibly could." To do this, she interviewed all department heads, many key people within the support staff, and the vice-principals. She even discussed her actions and perceptions with her predecessor who was the founding principal and who had hired the staff. In all of her conversations, no one had impressed upon her the degree to which the staff assumed and demanded their right to speak on every major decision, nor the depth of some of the rifts between departments and programs. In one incident early in her succession, she described a meeting she had with department heads. By the end of the day, no agreement had been reached on anything, but people had had the opportunity to express their views.

> All of the undercurrents and disagreements were out on the table. I didn't have very much to look for any more. All the things people were discontent about surfaced.

Beth was surprised by her accidental discovery of rifts, the depths of which she had not suspected. Fortunately, she used her information to modify her perceptions of the school and her practices accordingly.

When faced with an ambiguous situation caused by a lack of information, principals interpret their perceptions without possibly understanding the nature of the standards of behaviour involved. These principals

> will be concerned with maintaining the impression they are living up to the many standards by which they and their products are judged. Because these standards are so numerous and so pervasive, the individuals who are performers dwell more than we might think in a moral world. But, *qua* performers, individuals are concerned not with the moral issue of realizing these standards, but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized (Goffman, 1959: p. 251).

Some new principals make the mistake of trying to live up to these standards, not knowing which standards are actually artificial to the context and potentially hazardous to the acceptance of their administration by teachers. To illustrate, Jim assumed that teachers had legitimate reasons for requests and tried to honour as many requests as possible.

> I've always tried to say "Yes" to teachers. I've found, to my horror, the job demands I say "No" often. In terms of the future, I might have been better if I had said "No" more often in my first year. But I'm not too critical of myself because what that staff needed in its first year was pleasantry, was social consistency, was to be made to feel important again.

Staff used Jim's inexperience to their advantage, but did not abuse him to the extent they could have. Once he realized what they had done, he did not penalize them. Instead, he let them know that he was aware of their actions, he used the situation to build staff support and he was careful in future to filter and to check carefully the information which was fed to him.

The Nature of the Boundary: A possible description

To teachers in the new principal's school, status passage is not the issue, but role distance is, especially if the new principal is appointed from outside of the organization. For new principals, however, the appointment **is** a status passage, one which may cause a feeling of isolation from a once familiar school culture. The support of comrades to ease the adjustment to the administrator's role is limited or non-existent because the individual has been removed from the teaching milieu. In effect, a principal's first school is special for what it represents to

the appointee. But to the staff, the principal is often considered as just another administrator with a reputation to build (Macmillan, 1992).

Consequently, when appointed to a school, a new principal has to learn not only about the role, but also about the new school's culture and the meaning of that role within that context. At least three barriers prevent the principal from easily learning about a school's culture. First, information is controlled by both the teaching and the support staff. The new principal soon realizes that the new role restricts direct, unbiased access to knowledge of the culture resident in its members (Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985), and that the nature and accuracy of information can be determined only through observation and trial-and-error. Second, while the principal is a key factor in determining how teachers interact, the power and authority of the principal's role restricts and alters access to and knowledge of those interactions. Third, creating personal ties with specific staff members has micropolitical implications for the new principal and is discouraged by superiors for reasons associated with the evaluative nature of the role.

As argued elsewhere (Macmillan, 1992), these barriers are even more evident in school systems which practice the systematic rotation of principals. Staffs in these systems often view the principal as an interloper to be tolerated or marginalized. For new principals here, once some of the barriers have been breached, the thought of leaving their first school and of starting over again elsewhere becomes discouraging. Learning the role is still ongoing, excitement over possibilities for change continues and initiatives begun are likely not at the stage of institutionalization. In the second year of her tenure, for example, Beth showed unguarded dismay when asked about the survival of her innovations beyond her tenure. Although the school district's rotation policy required her to be transferred within three years of this second interview, she had not considered that she would not be present to see the outcome of her efforts.

Not seeing projects instituted fully may influence principals' perception of their role and of schools. Jim stated that principals may require more time in each school to gain the benefits from seeing their efforts come to fruition. For him, "people move too fast through the system for people to gather the seasoning" they need. This lack of seasoning in one institution may, in fact, cause principals to view schools generically and not individually and to believe that their skills can be easily transferred from one institution to another. The amount of energy these

principals invest in an innovation will likely be limited, or their role altered to one of facilitator, leaving longer term members of the school to provide the effort for implementation and final institutionalization (Macmillan, 1993).

The Boundary: A cultural separation?

In consideration of the data of this study, Marshall's (1991) Micropolitical hypothesis seems to be an appropriate description of beginning principals' experiences. Unlike Marshall's participants, both Beth and Jim described internal conflict as they worked through their understanding of their school's culture and their pre-conceptions of the principal's role. External conflict also existed as both principals and teachers negotiated a new reality based on the culture of their schools and the principals' understanding of that culture and of their role within it.

Both Beth and Jim discussed their sense of isolation from participating as equal partners with teachers in the cultures of their schools. While they understood and recognized the influence that their practices had on their schools, they felt that teachers viewed them as adjuncts to and not equal participants in forming and maintaining the culture (Macmillan, 1992). For these individuals, teachers and school board policies denied them a definite sense of identification with one school. This situation was compounded by teachers who believed that principals were extensions of central office administration, and by central office administration who treated principals as integral members of their schools.

Principals in these situations are faced with the dilemma: Do they serve the school or do they serve the system (Cuban, 1994)? Like managers who have been excluded from close identification with and intimate involvement in the culture of their organizations (Kanter, 1977), these principals developed ties with other colleagues who had themselves been excluded from full and intimate participation in their schools. Both Beth and Jim talked of discussions that they had with other new principals and professional connections that they established with experienced principals in their school district. These ties served to legitimize their experience and to provide a sympathetic ear when problems arose. By virtue of their common experience of exclusion, these principals formed their own informal group based on common problems, common

understanding of the role and common view of how schools function in general. This group served to provide identification when Beth and Jim felt displaced by the nature of their role.

Generally, ties to these groups are often reinforced for personal and professional reasons, and may take on the trappings of an exclusive club, the membership for which requires the same status passage and similar experiences and views. Membership usually entails mutual support for its members who are caught between their staffs and the central office, with both often making quite different and even conflicting demands on principals. The ability to discuss issues or problems without micro-political overtones or career-altering judgments becomes an essential component of these groups (Parkay & Currie, 1992).

Marshall (1991) did not approach her exploration of the separation between teachers and administrators from the point of professional cultural differences; she began by interviewing administrators within the context of schools. By exploring the separation through an examination of cultural connections between administrators, and by probing these connections, the micropolitical hypothesis may prove the best explanation yet for her present findings.

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